


EDITORIAL

Quarantine; Economy Versus Public Health. What do We Learn from the History of Medicine?

The COVID-19 pandemic has probably changed our lifestyle for a long time. This uncharted territory has left us with unprecedented experience of living in isolation, working remotely and meeting with loved ones through online platforms. Technology has definitely helped us better manage this predicament, nonetheless it heavily affected the world's economy by lockdowns, impairing the global supply chain and increasing job losses. Probably at the very beginning of the catastrophe there were some denials and information control lest it terrify the people. However, it did not take too long for the virus to loom as a public health crisis and take lives of people worldwide. The crisis is not over yet and we are long from being back to what would have been regarded as normal life.

What did we learn from the past to manage the new public health crisis? Likewise, what did we learn from this recent pandemic? This was not the first time that the world was experiencing the spread of a deadly infectious disease. Sadly, it would not be the last time either. This is a critical question for future outbreaks that governments need to answer and

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review to ensure the enforcement of the most effective safety measures for public health.

The first line of reaction to control COVID-19 was the centuries-old mechanism of separating people who may have been exposed to the disease – the so-called quarantine. This disease controlling strategy has been practiced among different nations at different times. For example, in the plague epidemic of 1347-1352 restrictions were posed on strangers coming into city-states in Italy (Cohen, 1974) Temporary makeshift camps were structured to separate the infected persons from healthy individuals (Platt, 2014). Quarantine, as a method for controlling the spread of contagious disease, has also been recommended by Avicenna (980-1037 in his seminal work, *Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* or the *Cannon of Medicine* (Aligabi, 2020, pp. 310-312).

When the novel Coronavirus was first detected in Wuhan, we were unready and defenseless. It did not take long for the virus to travel to Europe (initially Italy), Middle East and the rest of the world. Quarantine was the first line of action. However, even though its effectiveness has been proven throughout the history of medicine (Tognotti, 2013, p. 254), there were states which objected and resisted the idea. On the other hand, there were countries such as Canada and mainland China enforced stringent lockdowns and accepted social and economic turmoil caused by this strategy. Current data strongly suggest that quarantine was effective in reducing the number of peaks and delaying the time of peak of the disease.

Records from the past history of quarantine as well as the recent experience shows that quarantine, specially at the early stages, is an effective (and probably the only) strategy to reduce the impact of infectious diseases. This was not without social stigma and frustration but saved lives. The success of implementing quarantine in the modern world - with the main interest of many governments being the economy - is yet a question to answer.

References

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